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FICTION WITH NORTH CAROLINA SETTING

Incidents and Distinctive Traits Translated Into Literature.

A List of Books.

(By Louis R. Wilson, Librarian of the University of North Carolina.)

A recent re-reading of "The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come," "The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains," and "Creole Days," with their glow of local color, abundance of individual characteristics, and distinctive peculiarities of life has again raised in my mind a number of questions concerning the body of fiction having as its "setting" facts and peculiarities incident to North Carolina life. Of these, several are worthy of answer if answer can be found. What, in fact, has been written in fictional form about the Old North State? What pages of her history have kindled the imagination of the romancer? Has the Tar Heel State a distinctive local color—a genuine tar—all her own? And then what values may be placed upon the work of those who have discovered these characteristics and have attempted to invest them with the interest and charm of story?

Biographical, poetical, and historical works, especially the last, based on North Carolina subjects or written by resident North Carolinians, have received generous attention during the past few years. Each year they have been brought under careful review and that production evidencing greatest merit has received a correspondingly high recognition. But what of the fiction based on North Carolina life? What of the older stories as well as the new? How many North Carolinians can name three novels written about the State other than those by Thomas Dixon and Christian Reid?

As a result of our school training and general reading, we know that the fate of the Lost Colony, the Battle of Alamance, the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781, and North Carolina's participation in the Civil War have been made the frequent subject of painstaking historical investigation, but we have failed to learn that around these same subjects the drapery of thrilling story and romance have been artistically drawn. We are aware, too, that our unsurpassed mountains of the West—our "Land of the Sky"—are known everywhere in America. Daily they are characterized in terms of park reservations and scenery and climate, as their inhabitants are in the terms of population and educational statistics. But seldom has it been even hinted to us what the story writer, with heart open to the grandeur of mountain and peak and the infinite beauty of human character has seen in our western skyland and has presented to us in fictional form.

My object in this paper will be to answer in so far as I may the questions which have suggested themselves to me. I shall attempt to point out such incidents and settings as have impressed novelists with their suitableness as subjects for artistic treatment; to discover what, if anything, most approaches a distinctive local color in our life; to appraise the value of the body of literature which these stories constitute; and to give a hastily compiled, incomplete list of titles which relate to the State. Or, if I may make use of a figure, it will be my purpose to play the part of an angler who has spent the day along the winding stream of North Carolina's life. I shall speak of the alder-shaded depths or the swirling pools from which the trout rose best. And there are the differences between the North Carolina species and the Tennessee to note. And the weight of some of the finest catches will have to be told. And then I shall have to open my fisherman's basket and prove by actual demonstration that the day's catch has been an unmistakably large one.

"Setting," or incidents, or special phases of our life—whatever we may call that woof out of which stories are woven—are few as compared with the number of stories growing out of them. This is as should be expected; for all phases of our life have not been equally interesting and picturesque. The shaded pools and the swirling rapids have naturally received more attention than the unobstructed runs through the open meadows. Without attempting too close a classification, and allowing for occasional, unimportant exceptions, these settings may be characterized for the sake of distinction as (1) historical, (2) social, (3) political, and (4) descriptive. A further subdivision may be made of these in the interest of greater clearness. The historical may be divided into three representing, respectively, the periods of settlement on Roanoke Island, of the Battles of Alamance and Moore's Creek Bridge, and of the Revolution. The social need no division. Reconstruction times and the Wilmington Riots constitute the political, while the Carolina Banks and the Blue Ridge Mountains furnish the two principal bases for nature and character descriptions.

The attempted settlement of Roanoke Island in 1587 by Governor White and the consequent tragic fate of Virginia Dare stand at the head of the historical settings which have been embodied in story. A half dozen novels written within the past twenty years have selected that mist-enshrouded tragedy as their central theme. Their pages resound with the noisy shipping of fearless sea captains setting forth from English ports. After tempestuous voyages made hazardous by secret spies on board as well as by hostile galleons sweeping the Spanish main, the long overdue craft drop anchor off our eastern shore. Fortresses are quickly erected; relations are established between the new comers and the natives; Virginia Dare, the first white child of the new world, is born; leaders are chosen to preside over the destinies of the colony until it can be strengthened by fresh arrivals from the homeland; Governor White bids adieu to the little granddaughter and spreads his sail only to return and search in vain for the colony of his planting. Mocked by the inscription "Croatan," weary with heavy hearted searching, the ships turn hopeless back home.

One hundred and eighty years intervene between the first and second historical settings. The battles of Alamance and Moore's Creek Bridge are fought in this second period and action centers around Hillsboro and New Bern, the seat of the Provincial Governors, Tryon and Martin. The Lower Cape Fear region and Roanoke Island are also prominent in two novels which embody this setting, "Wallannah," by Hargrave, and "Old Dan Tucker," by Wiley. New Bern's social life, Tryon's vanity and cruelty, the Regulators' earnestness, and the fortunes of battle find expression in "Wallannah." "The Regulators," by Otis, though in no proper sense a novel, fills out the picture of the times. A different view of the same scenes is afforded by "Old Dan Tucker." Governor Martin, the representative of the Crown, the "Bankers" of Eastern Carolina, the Highlanders of the Cape Fear section, the pre-Revolutionary patriots, Harnett, Lillington, and Caswell, appear in the rôle of principal protagonists. Feverish activity characterizes the whole setting and predicates the fields of Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse on which wrongs long borne without redress will be righted.

The Revolution followed the Regulation. The importance of this great American crisis was so significant that North Carolina's brilliant participation in it has compelled the interest of the novelist as well as of the historian. But unlike South Carolina, the deeds of whose Marions and Sumters were thrillingly told four decades ago by William Gilmore Simms, North Carolina has had to wait these thirty years to find an artist to portray adequately the great part which she heroically played in that grim struggle. I purposely exclude "The Hornet's Nest," by Roe, and "Alamance," by Wiley, though written years ago and dealing with Revolutionary incidents, because they are in no true sense genuine fiction. It remained for Mrs. Kennedy and Mr. Brady, in "Joscelyn Cheshire" and "When Blades are out and Love's Afield" to write realistically of those stirring times. Central Carolina—from Hillsboro to Salisbury—is the scene of action. The staffs of Greene and Cornwallis, the ranks of the two battle lines, and the members of tory and patriot households along the lines of march from Cowpens to Yorktown, furnish the heroes and heroines of these stories.

This setting and the first are vastly different. Virginia Dare has been lost to view on the mist-shrouded shore of Roanoke. The cruel, moccasined Indian, then the victor, now the vanquished, has taken his silent trail to the distant West. Tryon and Martin no longer press the yoke of the Crown upon a long-suffering colony. The heroes of Alamance and Moore's Creek Bridge have passed through the period of testing and have emerged true, liberty-loving American patriots. The fight for independence is on. The birth-morn of a great and noble people is at the dawning.

The seventy years intervening between 1780 and 1850 contribute nothing of historical import to the novelist. Although the war of 1812 fell within this period, nothing of the State's participation in it has found a chronicler. But the decade from 1850 to 1860 furnishes a most interesting setting. It is social, not historical, and is characterized by the fine atmosphere of hospitality, the wealth of romance, the unbounded prosperity, the genuine cultured refinement of the Old South. In "The Heirs of St. Kilda," a novel only by courtesy, and "Sea Gift," this setting furnishes the woof for wholesome, pleasing romance. The scene of the former is laid at the splendid estates of one of the before-the-war families of the central counties of the State—Chatham, presumably. Gentlemen of the old school, queenly ladies, imposing mansions, extensive servant quarters, numberless thoroughbreds of horse and hound, are objects around which the story centers. School boy experiences near Wilmington, student life at the University in ante bellum days, and scouting duty beyond the Union lines as participated in by a favored son of the Old South are depicted in "Sea Gift." Fox hunting and weddings at the country estates, student escapades and commencement dances at the University, visits to the continent and watering places in the acquisition of culture or in the search for pleasure, these and the sentiment and luxurious ease of the forties and fifties, are the themes to which we of a later day turn back in these two stories and ponder. For us its unreality is its charm.

Two political situations of importance have arisen in the State since 1865. I refer to the struggles for party supremacy during reconstruction days and the political conditions which precipitated the Wilmington riot of 1898. "A Fool's Errand" and "The Marrow of Tradition" embody them respectively. "The Leopard's Spots," covering the greater part of the three decades from 1870 to 1900, embraces both. A description of either is unnecessary here; for every detail of the misery and horror of the former is only too well known by us, and the latter is still painfully fresh in our memories.

As might naturally be expected, the beauty of Western North Carolina mountains and the picturesqueness of the mountaineer's character have repeatedly been treated by the novelist. In "The Land of the Sky," by Christian Reid, valleys, peaks, sunshine, shadows, the ever-changing appearance of the mountains themselves and their slumbering mysterious spirit are themes of compelling interest. "Louisiana," "A Tar Heel Baron," "The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains"—I might mention a dozen of most readable stories—have made a splendid background of these characteristics against which they have presented the native sons and daughters of the mountains. And these sons and daughters, what of them? Their separation from the outer world, their silence, their independence, their fidelity, their nearness to the heart of nature, their kinship to the mountains about them, their loves, their hates—these are, if I mistake not, and will continue to be the subjects of North Carolina's best fiction. Here is material fit for the master's hand.

A careful consideration of the foregoing leads to the conclusion that North Carolina has a history and life so characteristically her own that she will always invite the attention of the novelist. The settlement of Roanoke Island and the unknown fate of the first American white child will never lose its irresistible romantic charm. The love of liberty as exhibited by Regulator and Mecklenburg patriot will be a theme undying. Hillsboro, Greensboro, Salisbury, Charlotte, King's Mountain—these names will ever be recalled when North Carolina stories recount noble needs done bravely. While "My Lady Pocahontas," "Eutaw," and "Red Rock" are based on conditions similar to those portrayed in "John Vytal," "Joscelyn Cheshire," and "The Leopard's Spots," respectively, there was but one North Carolina among the original colonies, and there is but one North Carolina today. Of Western North Carolina this is doubly true. Its mountains and their sons have been marked for artistic presentation. Both are to have their Cables and Allens just as Louisiana and Kentucky have had theirs; for in the grandeur of the one and the strength of the other is that which will have itself told in story. North Carolina's best fiction is yet to find its basis in this setting.

As my reading has not been so extensive as to bring every setting embodied in our fiction to my attention, so has it also not been so critical as to enable me to judge finally of the worth of each story read. Consequently, whatever value I may place on any particular volume or volumes will be estimated in accord with my own opinion and will not necessarily be considered the result of careful investigation and critical comparison.

Of the Virginia Dare stories, "John Vytal" is especially well conceived and executed. The days of Raleigh, Drake, and the Spanish main are vividly portrayed. Skillful fencing, jesuitical trickery, the dread of stealthy Indiancraft, the silence of interminable swamp and forest, fill every page with a wonderful, realistic picture. Characters are strongly cast and the story has charm and vitality.

"Joscelyn Cheshire" has the right of way over "When Blades are out and Love's Afield" and other Revolutionary stories. One could not help loving the spirited Hillsboro Tory maid and honoring the brave Hillsboro patriot. There is something tart in all of her sayings, and in her heart there is a love of which her heroic suitor can well strive to be the possessor.

"Sea Gift," though almost unknown to the recent North Carolina public, holds and will continue to hold a warm place in the hearts of all those who are fortunate enough to find and read one of the long out-of-print copies. The one copy at the University library has been constantly read and zealously guarded these last dozen years; for every son of the University who would know the traditions of his alma mater in the golden days of the forties and fifties goes to it and loses himself in the glamour and romance of its pages. Though this copy has never been issued for reading outside the library building, and consequently has been read under difficulty, I have yet to see a reader who has found his way into its pages stop, finally, until the last page has been finished.

The Tourgee, Dixon, and Chestnut stories (the last by a negro originally from Wilmington or Fayetteville) have been sufficiently exploited to need no review at my hands. It may suffice to s that they present in strong, vigorous fashion the bitterest political struggles through which North Carolina has passed. While they are not the most pleasant reading and are bitterly partisan, they are exceedingly valuable in filling out the historical story of the seventies and late nineties. They supplement and make living the thrilling experiences of those stormy days.

Coming again to the stories of Western North Carolina, I find my interest keenest and my hopes best realized in them. There is something distinctive, finished, about "The Land of the Sky," "Louisiana," "The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains." It is true that I hail from the mountain side and was cradled beneath mountain skies. Like Kipling's son of the hills, I may find my heart too easily turning to them; but Mrs. Tiernan, Mrs. Burnett, and Miss Murfree have felt the spell, the mystery, the spirit of the mountains. They are at home above the cloud line and they know the heart of their mountain folk. That violence has been done this mountain folk by writers who have not known its real heart is too obvious for comment. In their attempt to apply local color they have hidden the real, the true mountaineer. But in the three stories mentioned there is insight, sympathy, truth, beauty. There is the approach to the really great story. They give the promise of vital fiction, the realization of which I believe will yet be splendidly achieved.

Appendix.

The "settings" considered above, along with others not included in the body of the paper, are to be found in the following list of fictional works which relate in whole or in part to North Carolina. If other titles are known, and there must be a number of such, I should be glad to be informed concerning them.

Altsheler, J. A., My Captive. Appleton, New York, 1902.

Battle, L. E., Forget-me-nots of the Civil War. Fleming, St. Louis, 1909.

Beale, Maria, Jack O'Doon. Holt, New York, 1894.

Brady, C. T., When Blades are out and Love's Afield. Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1991.

Bryant, H. E. C., Tar Heel Tales. Stone, Charlotte, 1910.

Burnett, F. H., Louisiana. Scribner, New York, 1907.

Carter, M. N., North Carolina Sketches. McClurg, Chicago, 1900.

Chestnutt, C. W., Marrow of Tradition. Houghton, Boston, 1901.

Churchill, Winston, The Crossing. Macmillan, New York, 1907.

Clements, Marie, Lillian De Vere. Scroll Publishing Co., Chicago, c. 1902.

Devereux, Margaret, Plantation Sketches. Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1906.

Dickson, S. O'H., Ralph Fabian's Mistakes. Broadway Publishing Co., New York, c. 1903.

Dickson, S. O'H., Reuben Delton, Preacher. Presbyterian Com. of Pub., Richmond, 1900.

Dickson, S. O'H., Story of Marthy. Presbyterian Com. of Pub., Richmond, c. 1898.

Dixon, Thomas, Leopard's Spots. Wessels, New York, 1906.

Douglas, J. J., Girdle of the Great. Broadway Publishing Co., New York, c. 1903.

Drysdale, William, Pine Ridge Plantation. Crowell, New York, 1901.

Dugger, S. M., Balsam Groves of the Grandfather Mountain. Dugger, Banner Elk, 1892.

Dunlap, R. K., Mabel Gordon. J. S. Ogilvie Publishing Co., New York, 1901.

Erskine, Payne, When the Gates Lift up their Heads. Little, Boston, 1901.

Hargrave, W. L., Wallannah. Johnson, Richmond, 1902.

Hawkins, W. G., Lunsford Lane. Crosby, Boston, 1864.

Howell, A. J., Money Island. Commercial Printing Co., Wilmington, c. 1908.

Jerome, T. J., Ku-Klux Klan No. 40. Edwards, Raleigh, 1895.

Kennedy, S. B., Joscelyn Cheshire. Doubleday, New York, 1901.

Lawson, L. B., Leonora. Neale, New York, 1904.

McLean, Eddie, Sweet Old Days in Dixie. Edwards, Raleigh, 1907.

Melton, F. J., A Daughter of the Highlanders. Roxburgh Publishing Co., 1910.

Moore, J. W., Heirs of St. Kilda. Edwards, Raleigh, 1881.

Murfree, M. N., Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains. Houghton, Boston, 1886.

Nicholson, Meredith, Little Brown Jug at Kildare. Bobbs, Indianapolis, 1908.

Osborne, Mrs., Under Golden Skies. Edwards, Raleigh, 1898.

Otis, James, With the Regulators. Burt, New York, c. 1901.

Paine, D. C., Maid of the Mountains. Jacobs, Philadelphia, 1906.

Payson, W. F., John Vytal. Harper, New York, 1901.

Peake, E. E., The Darlingtons. McClure, New York, 1900.

Pelton, M. S. C., Tar Heel Baron. Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1903.

Pool, B. F., The Eyrie. Broadway Publishing Co., New York, c. 1905.

Reid, Christian, Land of the Sky. Appleton, New York, 1907.

Roe, E. P., Hornet's Nest. Dodd, New York, c. 1892.

S., E. A. B., Virginia Dare. Whittaker, New York, 1892.

"Skitt," Fisher River Scenes and Characters. Harper, New York, 1859.

Stowe, H. B., Dred, a Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp. Houghton, Boston, 1896.

Thompson, A. E., Polly of the Pines. Lothrop, Boston, 1906.

Thurston, Lucy, Jenifer. Little, Boston, 1907.

Tourgee, A. W., A Royal Gentleman. Fords, New York, c. 1874.

Tourgee, A. W., Bricks Without Straw. Fords, New York, c. 1880.

Tourgee, A. W., Fool's Errand. Fords, New York, 1880.

Tourgee, A. W., John Eax. Fords, New York, c. 1882.

Tourgee, A. W., 'Zouri's Christmas. Fords, New York, c. 1881.

Tracy, J. P., The Blockade Runner. Street, New York, c. 1896.

True, J. P., On Guard! Against Tory and Tarleton. Little, Boston, 1909.

Wall, M. V., The Daughter of Virginia Dare. Neale, New York, 1908.

Wiley, C. H., Adventures of Old Dan Tucker. Willoughby, London.

Wiley, C. H., Alamance. Harper(?)

Wilson, W. T., For the Love of Lady Margaret. Stone, Charlotte, 1908.

Worth, Nicholas, The Southerner. Doubleday, New York, 1909.